

American

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President Obama: Iraqi Election “Important Milestone”

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Millions of Iraqis braved threats of violence to exercise their right to vote March 7, and President Obama praised their courage and commitment to the democratic process, describing the vote as an “important milestone in Iraqi history.”

Speaking to reporters at the White House March 7, the president pledged continued U.S. support to help the Iraqis “take control of their future,” while working to responsibly end the war and the U.S. troop presence in Iraq.

“I congratulate the Iraqi people on their courage throughout this historic election. Today, in the face of violence from those who would only destroy, Iraqis took a step forward in the hard work of building up their country,” Obama said.

Press reports indicated that at least 35 people were killed by bomb attacks in Baghdad March 7, with additional attacks reported in Mosul, Falluja, Baquba and Samarra.

Obama said, “Al-Qaida in Iraq and other extremists tried to disrupt Iraq’s progress by murdering innocent Iraqis who were exercising their democratic rights,” but he added that the overall level of security and the prevention of attacks “speaks to the growing capability and professionalism of Iraqi Security Forces, which took the lead in providing protection at the polls.”

Along with Iraqis serving as poll station workers and observers at the nearly 50,000 voting booths and more than 8,000 polling stations across the country, Iraq’s Independent High Electoral Commission organized and administered the vote, and the president said the election “makes it clear that the future of Iraq belongs to the people of Iraq.”

Obama said the formation of a new Iraqi government is likely to take months following the vote count, adjudication of any alleged election frauds, and the building of a governing coalition.

“In this process, the United States does not support particular candidates or coalitions. We support the right of the Iraqi people to choose their own leaders,” he said.

He also warned of “very difficult days ahead” with more violence, but said Iraq must be allowed to exercise its sovereignty and independence.

“No one should seek to influence, exploit or disrupt this period of transition. Now is the time for every neighbor and nation to respect Iraq’s sovereignty and territorial integrity,” the president said.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton also congratulated the Iraqi people in a March 7 statement, praising their determination to reaffirm their commitment to democracy and a future without fear or intimidation.

“There is no better rebuke to the violent extremists who seek to derail Iraq’s progress,” Clinton said.

The U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Christopher Hill, told ABC television March 8 that Iraq had seen a good campaign and a successful election. All of Iraq’s political parties participated in the process, he said, which was a contrast from the 2005 election, which the Sunni population largely boycotted.

The Iraqi public is “overwhelmingly supportive of this political process,” Hill said. He said he believes that, despite challenges and rivalries among the political parties, a government will be formed.

“There have been a lot of conversations among the coalitions already. And ... it will be a protracted period where there will be a lot of political horse trading,” he said.

General Ray Odierno, who commands U.S. forces in Iraq, told the MSNBC network March 8 that American combat forces remain on schedule to leave the country by the end of August, and the additional 50,000 troops that are scheduled to stay until December 2011 will be there in support of Iraqi forces.

“We’re focused on helping them in their institutional piece of their army, developing long-term programs, developing long-term modernization programs, continuing to help them with their logistics, continuing to help them with the supporting military equipment, such as air sovereignty, being able to protect their oil fields out in the Arabian Gulf,” Odierno said.

Moreover, U.S. support for the Iraqi people and their institutions “will not end in December 2011,” he said. “There’ll have to be a continued commitment by the embassy and all our great civilians here, and the U.S. government, to continue to help Iraq move forward.”

Nuclear Treaty Still Curbs Spread of Weapons

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — While the threat of global nuclear war

largely has passed, the danger of nuclear proliferation continues to make the 40-year-old Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as relevant today as it was during the height of the Cold War, President Obama says.

The treaty, which is commonly known by its initials NPT, came into force March 5, 1970, and was intended to limit the spread of nuclear weapons. It was proposed by Ireland and Finland, which were the first nations to sign it.

Obama, marking the treaty's 40th, said March 5 that it is built on three pillars: nations with nuclear weapons will move toward disarmament; nations without nuclear weapons will forgo them; and all nations have an "inalienable right" to peaceful nuclear energy. These pillars are also central to Obama's view of a world free from nuclear weapons, which he first proposed in an April 5, 2009 speech in Prague.

"To promote disarmament, the United States is working with Russia to complete negotiations on a new START Treaty [Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty] that will significantly reduce our nuclear arsenals," Obama said. "To prevent proliferation, we will build on the historic resolution that we achieved at the United Nations Security Council last September by bringing together more than 40 nations at our Nuclear Security Summit next month with the goal of securing the world's vulnerable nuclear materials in four years."

Negotiators from the United States and Russia have been working since early 2009 to draw up a new treaty to replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty that expired in December 2009. Obama said those negotiations are ongoing, and a successor treaty is expected soon.

The United States and Russia have agreed to maintain the treaty until a new agreement is reached, saying that strategic stability is important. In April 2009, when Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev held their first face-to-face meeting in London, the two leaders pledged to work for a world free of nuclear arms, and said every effort would be made before the end of this year to reduce their nuclear arsenals with the long-term goal of reducing global nuclear tensions.

At the Moscow Summit in July 2009, Obama and Medvedev agreed to reduce the number of nuclear warheads each possesses to a range of 1,500 to 1,675 over seven years. The treaty would also limit the means of delivery, which includes nuclear-powered submarines, long-range bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles. The missiles can also be used to deliver non-nuclear warheads over the same distances, and that has been one of several highly technical areas of discussion.

In Prague in April 2009, Obama called for a nuclear-free world and he pledged to work for greater arms control and nonproliferation goals. Obama's call comes at a time when Washington is enlisting Moscow's support in curbing the nuclear ambitions of both North Korea and Iran. The United States and Russia participate in talks aimed at convincing those two regimes to give up weapons and long-range missile development programs.

In his March 5 statement, Obama said that to ensure the peaceful use of nuclear energy, the United States seeks a new framework for civil nuclear cooperation among nations, including an international fuel bank and the necessary resources and authority to strengthen the International Atomic Energy Agency.

"For nations that uphold their responsibilities, peaceful nuclear energy can help unlock advances in medicine, agriculture and economic development," Obama said.

Within weeks U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates will present to the president the Nuclear Posture Review, which will define the Obama administration's nuclear strategy for the United States. Every administration develops one soon after coming into office. Many of the president's objectives to reduce the U.S. arsenal and define how it could be used will be included in the posture review.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said March 5 that because of the nonproliferation treaty, more nations have given up nuclear weapons, or decided against pursuing them, than have acquired them.

"We are reaffirming our NPT commitments to make progress toward nuclear disarmament and guarantee access to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes to all those abiding by their nonproliferation commitments," Clinton said.

In May, the nations that are signatories to the treaty will convene at the United Nations for a monthlong review conference, which takes place every five years, to determine if additional amendments are needed to strengthen the treaty.

"A key to the treaty's success has been its legally binding structure, which holds member nations accountable, discourages proliferation, and brings the benefits of nuclear energy to all corners of the world," Clinton said.

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